

Review Article

Humanity from a Single Source and Gender Equality in Islam: Scriptural Foundations and Contemporary Practice

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Abstract: This article reviews the scriptural foundations of gender equality in Islam, centered on the Qur'anic principle that all humanity originates from a single soul (nafs wāḥidah). It analyzes key verses and prophetic examples (Hadith) to establish the absolute spiritual and moral equivalence of men and women before Allah, emphasizing that human worth is determined solely by piety and righteousness, not by gender. The paper demonstrates how this concept of equality is institutionally embedded in acts of worship, accountability, and women's historical and contemporary agency in knowledge and leadership. Furthermore, it addresses the challenges in contemporary Muslim-majority societies, where the core Islamic principles of equality are frequently undermined by cultural practices, patriarchal structures, and diverse legal interpretations, leading to persistent disparities in economic, educational, and political spheres. The conclusion asserts that despite these cultural discrepancies, the foundational message of Islam is unmistakable, calling for a continuous effort to ensure that the values of shared human dignity and spiritual equality shape current Muslim practice.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Islamic Teachings, Spiritual Equality, Cultural Practices, Qur'an and Hadith

Introduction

It is a great honor to speak on a topic that goes to the very heart of Islamic anthropology and ethics: How the concept of humanity originating from the same source, shapes the Islamic perspective on gender equality, and how this equality is reflected in religious practice today. In an era where conversations about gender are increasingly global, it is crucial to return to scriptural foundations to understand what Islam truly teaches about human equality.

Literature Review

Several scholars have written on Gender equality in Islam, drawing analogy from Islamic injunctions and their applications in Muslim majority societies. UNDP chronicles showed that women spend eight times more time on unpaid care work than men. In its 2022 Labor Force Survey, the outcome shows that 42 percent of women of working age participate in the workforce mostly earning less than men while 13 percent are landowners.

These disparities, according to the reports, provide insight into the issues of economic participation, wage inequality, and property rights of women. Furthermore, gender inequalities are occasioned by the society social norms and also, legal institutions that obviously operate to the disadvantage of women (Karbala and Kern 2022).

In Muslim-majority societies, economic related problems only constitute the starting point for women. They also have to contend with significant challenges in areas such as education, health, and political representation. For instance, cultural norms, early marriage, and p security challenges could affect accessibility to education for girls. In the same vein, women's health services are hampered by a relatively inferior health infrastructure and the prevalent gender bias. The same way that health facilities are dominated or controlled by men, political participation of women is usually curtailed by formal barriers and social pressures (Sakalli-Uğurlu 2016).

The status and rights of women have always changed at various times from one society to the other depending on culture, religion and legislation. In the early period of Islam, women's rights were a subject of continual development. Although Prophet Muhammad (Sallallahu ‘Alayhi Wasallam) emphasized on female education, property rights, and active public life for them; as the Islamic societies grow and develop, these inceptive prophetic provisions were frequently beclouded and relegated by cultural practices and patriarchal structures (McDonnell 2017).

Theologically, the standpoint of gender equality could be analyzed through the Qur’an and Hadith, in which the spiritual and moral equality of men and women is treated. However, it is pertinent to note that these texts are open to diverse interpretation just as their legal and social applications differ. An example is that, classical jurisprudence generally subordinates the status of women compared to men, while modern Islamic feminists make attempts to return to the original egalitarian principles of Islam (Ibnouf 2015).

Reconciling religious teachings with cultural practices has been a challenge. Reform movements such as legal reforms for more gender equality in inheritance and marriage laws have been gaining attention in several countries where Muslim population is in majority; plausible initiatives that are now helping women enjoy access to education and employment (Ahmad 2012).

Paradoxically, in many Muslim communities' today, women are not accorded the rights given them in Islam. In many societies Muslim are practicing their own cultures and customs; subjecting women to the whims and caprices of cultural norms, patriarchal features of their society and also political oppression. In Bangladesh, where majority of the people are Muslim and Islam plays a significant role in the country, people women still suffer exploitation and discrimination as the provisions of the Qur'an and Hadith are tempered just to relegate them (Patoari 2019).

In Afghanistan, recent decades have witnessed many changes in the legal status of women. The first regime of the Taliban was marked by extreme repression of women from 1996 to 2001: education and employment were forbidden and the freedom of movement was seriously restricted. The fall of the Taliban in 2001 brought about reforms on women's rights, as a new constitution adopted in 2004 established equality before the law and guaranteed all citizens, regardless of gender, the right to education and work (Amnesty International UK 2022).

The legal framework of gender equality and women's rights in Islamic contexts is very wide-ranging in nature, with influences that emerge from local interpretations of Sharia, national laws, and international human rights norms. Whereas the strict application followed in countries like Saudi Arabia leads to quite restrictive policies against women, in countries like Tunisia, the more progressive interpretations are merged with secular laws to give a stimulus to the cause of women. International treaties, like CEDAW, are also slated to intervene, though how to implement these proves quite challenging when customary practices conflict with religious interpretations. In light of this backdrop, both complex and intricate, how gender equality can be implemented is usually what is declared in the countries spanning the Islamic world (Otto 2008).

Humanity Originating From a Single Source: What the Qur'anic Says

The understanding of humanity in Islam is anchored on the principle that all human beings, male and female, originate from a single soul (*nafs wāḥidah*). The Qur'an and the Hadith are the sources of Islamic thought. Thus, the discourse on gender equality in Islam

has to be premised on the provisions of both the Qur'an and Hadith. In Islam, the Qur'an is the highest order of guidance as it contains verses emphasizing and equality of men and women before Allah (qurangallery.app).

The Qur'an, in Surah An-Nisa (Qur'an 4:1), declares:

“O people Be conscious of your Lord Who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate And from the pair of them He scattered numerous men and women” (Irfan-ul-quran).

This verse is rudimentary as it:

- i. Establishes a shared human origin, eliminating hierarchical notions between genders.
- ii. Emphasizes the unity of human nature, showing that men and women are partners in the human story.
- iii. Rejects myths of female inferiority, which were common in many pre-Islamic societies.

Another Surah, Al-A'raf (Q7:189) reinforces this shared dignity when Allah says, He is the One Who created you from a single soul, then from it made its spouse so he may find comfort in her. After he had been united with her, she carried a light burden that developed gradually (quran.com).

Islamic scholars across eras - such as Ibn Kathīr, Al-Ṭabarī, and Al-Qurṭubī - explain that this shared origin signifies equivalence in humanity, honour, and spiritual capacity.

Equality before Allah: Qur'anic and Prophetic Foundations

Islam's teachings on gender equality are not based on modern social theories, but on divine revelation. For example, Qur'an emphasizes their equal creation as human beings, regardless of gender (Sulthan 2023).

In Surah Al-Hujurat (Q49:13), Allah emphatically states:

“...Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you Allah is truly All Knowing All Aware” (quran.com).

This verse provides the framework for Islamic gender ethics:

- i. Human worth is determined by piety and moral character—not gender, wealth, or power.
- ii. Spiritual equality is absolute: Both men and women have the same capacity for faith, righteousness, and nearness to Allah.

Equal Reward and Equal Responsibility

Allah makes equality very clear in numerous verses. In Surah An-Nahl (Q16:97), He says:

“Whoever does good, whether or not male or female, and is a believer, We will certainly bless them with a very good life, and We will genuinely praise them in step with the best of their deeds” (reddit.com; quran.com).

Also, in Surah Al-Ahzab (Q33:35), Allah says:

“Surely for Muslim men and women, believing men and women, 1 devout men and women, truthful men and women, patient men and women, humble men and women...” (quran.com).

This verse (Quran 33:35) lists men and women side by side in ten spiritual categories, the strongest textual affirmation of gender equality in religious worth.

Furthermore, it is widely regarded by Muslim scholars and modern interpreters as a very strong and clear textual affirmation of gender equality in spiritual worth and moral accountability. This verse is widely cited as a textual affirmation of spiritual and moral gender equality in Islam. It explicitly addresses men and women side by side in ten distinct spiritual categories; promising both genders the same reward. That is, forgiveness and a great recompense.

The verse was reportedly revealed after the Prophet Muhammad's wife, Umm Salamah (or Umm 'Umara), asked why the Quran only seemed to mention men, leading to this direct divine address that treats both genders with impartiality regarding belief and faith and good conduct.

The ten categories of virtues listed in the verse that applies evenly to the Muslim men and women are:

- i. **Submissive** (Muslim men and women who submit to Allah)
- ii. **Belief** (believing men and women to none but Allah)
- iii. **Obedience** (obedient men and women to Allah)
- iv. **Truthfulness** (truthful men and women in their conducts)
- v. **Patience** (patient men and women in their belief and worship)
- vi. **Humility** (humble men and women who distance themselves from pride)
- vii. **Charity** (charitable men and women for the sake of Allah)
- viii. **Fasting** (fasting men and women as one of their religious obligations)

- ix. **Chastity** (men and women who guard their private parts)
- x. **Remembrance of Allah always** (men and women who remember Allah much)

The verse emphasizes that the path to salvation and spiritual excellence is the same for all human beings, regardless of gender. It affirms that an individual's worth in the sight of God is determined solely by such a person's righteousness and piety.

Prophetic Example

Jabir ibn Abdullah reported (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 1218): The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, "Fear Allah regarding women. Verily, you have taken them as a trust from Allah, and intercourse has been made lawful by the word of Allah" (abuaminelias).

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) evidently demonstrated this equality as he encouraged and promoted women's education, appointed them as leaders in various social roles, consulted with them on political and community matters. He made it clear that women are 'the twin halves of men'.

Thus, in Islam, spiritual equality is matched by an ethical and social emphasis on mutual respect and partnership.

How Islamic Equality Translates into Practice for Muslims Today

Muslim societies differ culturally but Islamic religious practice institutionally embeds gender equality in multiple ways. These include:

Equality in Worship

Islam's acts of worship are universal and identical for both genders:

- i. **Ṣalāh (daily prayers):** Men and women perform the same prayers, recitations, and postures.
- ii. **Ṣawm (fasting in Ramadan):** Rules are the same except for concessions during menstruation and childbirth, reflecting compassion rather than inequality.
- iii. **Zakat (almsgiving):** Obligatory on all Muslims who meet the criteria - male or female.
- iv. **Hajj (pilgrimage):** Rituals apply equally, with only minor protective concessions related to crowd safety and modesty.

Equality in Accountability

In Islamic law and theology:

- i. A woman's faith and deeds count equally before Allah.

- ii. She is accountable for her actions individually, with no spiritual dependency on men.
- iii. Good deeds, sins, supplications, repentance, and divine reward apply equally.

Women's Agency in Knowledge and Leadership

Historically and till today, Muslim women have exercised significant religious agency:

- i. Aisha (RA) narrated over 2,000 hadiths. She was one of the greatest jurists in early Islam.
- ii. Fatima al-Fihri founded the world's first university (Al-Qarawiyyīn) in the present day Morocco.
- iii. In contemporary times, women serve as Qur'an teachers, scholars, lecturers, judges in Shari'ah courts, and leaders in community institutions in many Muslim societies.

Equality in Access to Allah

Islam teaches that every human soul has direct access to Allah: no intermediary, no gender hierarchy.

This direct link nurtures spiritual confidence and personal dignity among Muslim men and women alike.

Contemporary Muslim Practice: Challenges and Progress

The teachings of Islam unambiguously affirm gender equality but cultural practices in some Muslim communities may not fully reflect these values. It is therefore important to:

- i. Differentiate Islamic principles from cultural applications.
- ii. Recognize reform and advocacy efforts by Muslim scholars, activists, and institutions.
- iii. Promote authentic religious knowledge as a tool for justice and equality.

Today, in many parts of the Muslim world:

- i. Women lead Qur'anic schools and Islamic institutions.
- ii. Female scholars issue fatwas, participate in interfaith dialogue, and serve in legal positions.
- iii. Women's participation in masjid (mosque) education programs is expanding.

These reflect a revival of the Islamic spirit of equality rooted in the Qur'an and as demonstrated by the Prophet.

Conclusion

Islam teaches that men and women originate from the same soul, stand equal before Allah, and share the same spiritual responsibilities and opportunities. This principle shapes Islamic belief, law, ethics, and worship.

Despite that cultural discrepancies exist, the core message of Islam remains unmistakable: Human dignity is shared, spiritual equality is guaranteed, and righteousness - not gender - is the measure of worth before Allah.

As scholars, leaders, and believers, our collective task is to ensure that the values of equality as embedded in Islamic revelation continue to shape Muslim practice in our various climes, now and in the future.

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